2013 Annual CM Report

For the Year Starting January 1

The "2013 Annual CM Report" marks the second occasion that the Gautier City Manager has produced an annual report-type document. As part of the City's efforts to communicate about local government and provide a greater level of transparency, we are producing an annual report that provides both a review of the prior year's challenges and accomplishments and a look-forward for the upcoming year.

In addition to providing information to the public about what's happening in the community, the annual report again acknowledges the important role that volunteers play when serving on City boards and commissions. This year we continue to increase recruitment efforts for volunteer service to the community.

The City of Gautier remains focused on making continuous improvements to services and programs for our residents, businesses and visitors. Distinctive neighborhoods, growing business districts, renowned educational institutions, superlative waterfront parks and nature preserves, award-winning sustainability efforts, a strong commitment to historic preservation, festive events and recreational opportunities are helping Gautier to grow. Sales tax continues to increase, along with the numbers of building permits, school-aged children, and business licenses.

"2013 was a year most notable for the city's significant progresses in infrastructure. At the same time, we're strengthening neighborhood services, parks and recreation, and continuing our economic development success."
-City Manager, Samantha Abell

In September 2013, with 5 of 7 seats filled with returning incumbents, the City Council underwent its first annual review of the city's 5-Year Strategic Plan. The Council also adopted a Council-Manager Roles and Responsibilities Manual now in distribution by the Mississippi Municipal League. With these solid goals and communication plan, we have aligned many city services for increased efficiency and savings.

2013 was a year most notable for the city's significant progresses in infrastructure. At the same time, we're strengthening neighborhood services, parks and recreation, and continuing our economic development success.

Infrastructure

Like the rest of the Coast, Gautier has identified the need for improved drainage and channel restoration as critical for preventing flooding and preserving our natural habitats. Drainage improvements will aid with shoreline protection/restoration improved recreation opportunities, increased tourism, and allows the continuation of a viable seafood industry for future generations. The City Council contracted with a service provider to operate and maintain (O&M) the city's public works, including routine annual maintenance on major drainage ways. The service provider's parent engineering company continues to inspect miles of drainage ditches south of HWY 90 for upcoming improvements made possible by 2013 state funds and the O&M contract. Additionally, in 2013 the City surveyed drainage improvements in the Hickory Hills neighborhood also to be funded by 2013 state funds.

Gautier City Manager talks shoreline restoration with MDEQ Executive Director, Trudy Fisher

The Graveline Bayou Restoration Project is an initiative spearheaded by citizens committed to the restoration of this important oyster reef and major drainage basin to the Sound. The project has been awarded Tidelands Funds for a restoration plan, and the city manager coordinated several notable meetings in 2013 between regional, state and federal authorities including the Executive Director of the Department of Environmental Quality, Trudy Fisher.

Also in 2013, MDOT granted Gautier request for improved lighting along our two interstate corridors into the city. In addition to improved lighting which will increase visitor traffic, MDOT is now installing traffic lights at Gautier-Vancleave Road/I-10 and also has plans for a park and ride facility for commuters.

Gautier's clear water ion exchange filtration system is fully designed and funded. The regional permit process to discharge treated water into the sewer system has been in review since last June. Once approved from the regional authority, this project can be bid out and fast underway. In 2012, the City refinanced old utility bonds for a lower interest rate, passing the savings towards the purchase of the water filtration system so that clear water will result in NO additional charge to residents. And best yet, with the routine treatment of the water system by the city's new O&M provider, already has residents experiencing improved water clarity.

Innovation and creative problem-solving continue to be a keystone of Gautier management. Gautier has recently undergone an energy performance audit in order to find cost-savings energy upgrades. This project will allow for the newest technology in water meters, providing internet-based customer service to residents and reliable service, in addition to other city system energy upgrades. This project was made possible by the Mississippi Development Authority's Energy and Natural Resources Division. Look for new meters and improved hi-tech service in 2014.

Streets

In 2013, Gautier made major strides on the Martin Bluff Road widening project. In April, a field review was conducted with MDOT and the Gulf Regional Planning Commission. The outcome of that review is that Martin Bluff Road will now have a 10' wide multi-use pathway, a wide "green belt", in addition to improved lighting, a decorative median, wider roads, and turn lanes. The improvements will extend on Martin Bluff Road from Gautier-Vancleave north to Martin Bluff Elementary School. The project has now entered the Right-of-Way acquisition stage. The City is now applying for a grant to continue the multi-use pathway from an upcoming park-and ride facility at Gautier-Vancleave Road and Frontage Road eastward to Martin Bluff Road.

The traffic roundabout, fountain, and sculpture were completed behind the mall as part of the Streetscape Project. The roundabout will be a wonderful complement to the mall redevelopment and the development of the new Lowe's outparcels.

Additionally, Gautier has installed "share the roadway" bicycle safety signs in neighborhoods such as Hickory Hills and Point Clear, with plans to continue this year.

Awards and Accolades

For its efforts to retain a much sought after plastics company along the I-10 Corridor, Gautier received a MEDC Community Economic Development Award for Business Retention and Expansion, February of 2013. This February, Gautier will again receive a MEDC Award, for the Town Center Streetscape Project branding the city as "Nature's Playground". The streetscape's dedication ceremony was held March 22, 2013.Gautier also received a Municipal Excellence Award for Community Spirit at the Mississippi Municipal League Conference, July 2013. Finally, Gautier's City Manager Samantha Abell became a

member of the Roland Weeks Leadership Hall of Fame, for being named in 2013 as one of the Top 10 Business Leaders Under 40 by The Journal of South Mississippi Business.

Neighborhood Services

Gautier's Neighborhood Services Division coordinates with all city departments, acting as a liaison between community needs and funding resources, volunteer efforts, and city resources. In 2013 Gautier saw the successful transition of Animal Control from the Police Department to Code Enforcement within the Neighborhood Services Division (May 2013). A Community Heritage Preservation grant totaling $80,000 was awarded for the restoration of the West Pascagoula Black School House. A Safe Routes to School grant was awarded in the amount of $100,000 and Gautier received $25,000 to remove illegal trash dumps. In all $771,324 in new grant funds was awarded in 2013 with direct benefits to city services and neighborhoods.

Administration

During Council's first three months in office, Council adopted an annual budget and held a Manager-Council Retreat, which will be followed by February's State of the City address at the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and a subsequent Town Hall meeting. The City held its second annual Christmas employee appreciation dinner, coordinated a Youth in Government Week with a month-long Facebook campaign kick-off in partnership with the school district's gifted students program, and has planned the third annual employee appreciation picnic for Spring. The Human Resources Department created a brand new employee training program, starting with supervisors, to reduce risk and liability and increase productivity. The Finance Department continues to work with all city departments in a transparent and helpful manner for greater efficiency and innovation in problem-solving. The Economic Development & Planning Department continues to make improvements to processes and codes to make the department more "business friendly".

Economic Development

Along the Highway 57/I-10 Corridor, the City is redesigning the connector road to meet the expanding needs of a 16+-acre medical campus. A Master Plan has been developed for the area. Property owners, hotel and retail developers are working with the city for the planned growth and development of this area. City staff is working with MDOT and JCUA to ensure new roadway connections and utility relocations associated with the Highway 57 project align with the City's Master Plan.

Major projects on the horizon are the $90 million mall demolition and redevelopment, development of the newly created Lowe's outparcels, and the development of the 32-acre town green.

Parks and Recreation

The Cultural Services Division and Recreation Advisory Committee were created in 2013. Gautier approved a Parks and Recreation Plan for improvements resulting from an anticipated 2% sales tax on prepared meals and hotel beds on a city referendum. The referendum failed by less than 50 votes, with low voter turnout. A second referendum for 2014 is planned.

The Cultural Services Division started a city run youth football and cheerleading league. The league had 140 participants in its first year. The Fire Department Association assisted with the league by operating concessions during the games.

The Fire Department Association and Cultural Services Division teamed up for the first annual Haunted Trails and Halloween Festival at Shepard State Park. More than 1000 people went through the haunted trails. The city opened up the festival area to school clubs for fund raising opportunities.

The Cultural Services Division continued throughout 2013 to provide support for sponsored events such as the Mullet Festival, Mardi Gras Parade, Christmas Parade, and 5k runs.

Public Safety

For public safety departments, the biggest challenge continues to be employee retention. Council approved a step increase for trained and qualified public safety employees this year, yet it isn't enough. The City of Gautier has not kept pace with its neighboring governments offering annual step increases. In future budget years, the city will explore merit-based step increases as a gap measure. It will take time, community support and economic development to restore our long-term fiscal health. Written exit interviews by departing employees have shown that employees are leaving almost exclusively due to low pay, yet a vast majority states their willingness to return to the city if wages were improved.

Fire

In 2013, Chief Robert Jones was promoted within the Fire Department. Fire Marshall Charles Thornburg

and Fire Chief Ray Frair both retired. The new Fire Station West is substantially complete, and the upcoming hiring of six new firefighters will result in maintaining low fire insurance ratings for citizens. Other milestones included the purchase of a new Command Vehicle for fire and rescue operations, increased efficiency through "out of the box" ideas, superlative teamwork and unity between members within the fire department as well as between all city employees (ex. Lip Dub, Central station roof repair, Haunted Trail, Youth football program).

Police

In 2013, the Police Department established the Inter-local Narcotics Task Force (SMMET) with Pascagoula and Moss Point. The department also implemented the Police Rescue Dive Team to assist with operations that occur on our waterways, and joined the Inter-local S.W.A.T. Task Force with Pascagoula P.D. 2013 also garnered a trained and certified State Accredited Accident Reconstruction Officer. Other accomplishments this year included the awarding of grants for DUI Enforcement and Ballistic Vests, and the purchase of (7) new vehicles with new patrol car design.

Neighborhood safety programs continue to be a priority with goals in the 5-Year Strategic Plan. The Police Department is opening a College Park neighborhood police substation at Bacot Park. The department also engaged youth with a kick-off for a successful Explorer Program, and continues to hold monthly neighborhood watch meetings with the city's crime prevention officer.

As you can see, the City of Gautier has had another successful year in large part due to the engagement of our volunteers who serve on boards and commissions. I encourage you to visit the city's improved website and Facebook page. Take a look at the City's Strategic Plan (www.gautier-ms.gov) for a complete description of services, programs, and projects that every City department is undertaking. As we look for creative ways to provide core services and new programs, we appreciate your feedback about how we are doing. We have a great challenge and opportunity in planning for the future. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Samantha D. Abell

City Manager